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BRIDGING INNOVATION AND ACCESS: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON ORPHAN DRUG DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES IN TREATING RARE DISEASES

Anurag Karpe[1], Sumit Jadhav[2], Sameer Sukhadeve[3], *Krutika Channe[4]

[1,2,3,4] Nagpur College of Pharmacy, Wanadongri, Hingna Road, Nagpur (Corresponding author[4])

ABSTRACT

Orphan drugs are a category of pharmaceuticals specifically designed for the treatment of rare diseases. They therefore represent an important unmet need within global healthcare systems. Rare diseases are typically defined by low prevalence: less than 5 per 10,000 people in the EU or less than 200,000 in the US. These diseases severely affect the quality of life of the patients but gain much less attention because of their low commercial viability. There have also been regulatory frameworks, such as the United States Orphan Drugs Act of 1983 and the European Union Regulation (EC) No 141/2000, among others, that encouraged research and development by offering market exclusivity, fiscal incentives, and accelerated approval processes. Challenges abound, however. The high cost of orphan drugs is often traced to the paucity of patients, cumbersome clinical trial regulations, and limited earnings from the small market.

Thus, the novel treatments are expensive and put a burden on health infrastructures and make them less accessible, particularly in developing countries. Promising interventions, such as gene-editing therapies, exemplified by Zolgensma, demonstrate their potential while underlining the need for fair pricing models. Recent developments in this area include the advancements in gene and stem cell therapies, small nucleic acid pharmaceuticals, and RNA-based treatments.

Collaborative approaches, including public partnerships and global research networks, accelerate progress in therapeutic interventions. However, unequal access is an issue that calls for political reforms, financial incentives, and adaptive pricing strategies. Pharmaceutical development for rare diseases is of great importance in the future.

It regulates flexibility and global cooperation and bases its efforts on the implementation of scientific discoveries that make innovation accessible. Overcoming financial, ethical, and social barriers to the production of drugs for orphan diseases is necessary to ensure fair treatment for 300 million people worldwide who suffer from rare diseases.

1. INTRODUCTION

Orphan drugs are pharmaceutical products that are specifically developed for the diagnosis, prevention, or treatment of conditions that lack sufficient market potential under typical marketing conditions. This definition highlights the unique challenges linked to orphan drugs, especially in the context of rare diseases, where the restricted patient population often leads to difficulties in conducting clinical trials. These include the lack of sufficient patients available for the study and a general apathy among pharmaceutical companies, which complicates the necessary clinical trials critical for the development of new therapeutic agents.

Rare Disease: According to the European Union, RDs are rare diseases, life-threatening or chronically debilitating conditions that affect less than 5 people in 10,000. Such conditions are unusual, and it is necessary to make 'specific efforts' to fight such diseases that could have 'high morbidity with potential perinatal or early mortality, and significant impairment in an individual's quality of life or socio-economic status [1].

1.1 Historical Background and Development of Orphan Drug Legislation:

The historical development of orphan drug laws started in the United States with the Orphan Drug Act of 1983.

This legislation was enacted as a way of giving financial incentives to drug manufacturers to take interest in researching treatments for rare diseases. Financial incentives included seven years of market exclusivity, tax credits to recover clinical trial expenses, and immunity from the fees of regulations.

Ten years later, in 1993, Japan's Pharmaceutical Affairs Act became law and gave 10 years of market exclusivity, along with tax incentives.

Part 3B of the Therapeutic Goods Regulations of Australia was implemented in 1997, with an incentive of fee exemptions for regulatory processes. In parallel, the European Union passed Regulation (EC) No 141/2000 in 1999 that defined criteria for the designation of orphan drugs along with incentives that would encourage research and development within this area [1]. There are significant legislative moves across various developed countries in this historical context related to orphan drug legislation, which has been aimed to accelerate research and development activities towards the treatment of rare diseases.

In the United States, the Orphan Drug Act of 1983, as amended in 2002, clearly outlined what is considered an orphan drug, and at the same time, offered incentives, such as tax advantages and market exclusivity, to pharmaceutical companies involved in the production of the said drugs. The European Union also had Regulation (EC) No 141/2000 and Regulation (EC) No 847/2000 in the year 2000 to encourage the development of orphan drugs.

The above mentioned legislative frameworks have played a crucial role in making orphan drugs more accessible, and one can clearly distinguish the relationship between these regulations and increased research activities concerning rare diseases [2]. The development of orphan drug legislation has also significantly affected the treatment of rare pulmonary disorders over the last two decades.

Legislative frameworks in place have challenged the pharmaceutical industries to invest their resources into the development of drugs for such diseases, which are otherwise commercially not viable because of the patient population size. A single industry effort from the respiratory medicine industry, supported by patient advocacy groups, has been enhanced through independent clinical studies and supported further by coordinated efforts by health authorities at national and European levels[3].

1.2 Importance of Orphan Drug in Health Care System:

Orphaned drugs are very important in the health system, as they underscore the carrying out of needs for patients with rare diseases—a demographic group often ignored in the traditional development of drugs. The US Orphan Drug Act of 1983 is announced as a major legislative realization that has promoted hope and empowered patients and their families to access treatments that, before now, were unavailable [4].

The ODA has had a profound impact on the health system through incentives for the development of drugs for rare diseases affecting fewer than 200,000 people in the United States. These incentives, such as tax breaks, user fee waivers, and seven-year exclusivity periods, have attracted investment in the biopharmaceutical industry, which has seen a rapid rise in the number of orphan drugs, particularly in oncology and neurology .

Basic and translational science advances, along with financial incentives, have helped usher in new treatments that can significantly improve patient outcomes.

In addition, active participation from patient organizations also plays an important role in fostering the development of treatments for rare diseases, highlighting how important orphan drugs are in addressing unmet medical needs within the healthcare system.[5]

Orphan drugs represent a key avenue towards satisfying the therapeutic needs of patients suffering from rare diseases; however, the difficulties inherent in developing therapies for these diseases have often meant that needs go unmet. Both the EU and US regulatory frameworks offer incentives to pharmaceutical companies to develop these drugs, such as grants, market exclusivity, and research support, which are needed if these products are not to be abandoned or delayed in development.Despite this, a great number of patients still remain with no substantial solution because only a small proportion of their therapeutic needs is satisfied [6].

Public registration and database are crucial in enhancing the knowledge of rare diseases and fostering research, and by extension increase the possibility of using drugs for orphans in the medical system.

Therefore, Heine preparation is an integral part of improving patients' health outcomes with rare diseases and calls for constant support and development in this area.

Orphan drugs are of great importance to the health care system, as they address the unmet medical needs of patients with rare diseases, which are usually not accorded much attention because of lower expected returns on investment for pharmaceutical companies. The development of such drugs involves high R&D investment, and government support is indispensable in fostering innovation in this area, especially in countries like China, where funding is still far from sufficient compared to developed countries like the U.S., which allocated more than $6 billion for rare disease research in 2021 [8]. Effective legislation and systematic policies are needed to further improve the development and accessibility of orphan drugs so that patients with rare diseases can get the necessary treatments and support [8]

2. REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

2.1 Overview of Global Orphan Drug Regulations

Orphan drug regulations vary widely around the world. However, the Orphan Drug Act (ODA), passed in the United States in 1983, has been an important model that has influenced similar legislation in countries such as Australia, the European Union, and Japan.

The ODA was developed to stimulate the development of drugs for rare diseases through incentives like market exclusivity and decreased costs, in order to confront the problem of orphan drugs, which have traditionally been neglected because of their low commercial appeal. However, despite these initiatives, the prevalence of rare diseases is increasing at a faster rate than the development of related treatments, partly due to the fact that pharmaceutical companies are still reluctant to invest in orphan drug research. In particular, large countries with populations, such as China and India, presently lack national legislation for orphan medicines, which may negatively impact their populations with rare diseases [9].

The global orphan drug regulations are meant to enable the development of treatments for rare diseases, which are usually devoid of effective therapies because of various challenges including low patient numbers and a lack of understanding of disease pathology.

Regulatory bodies, including the FDA, have been flexible in the application of approval standards to accommodate these unique challenges, enabling innovative clinical trial designs and statistical methods to address the difficulties posed by small patient populations [10].

A recent conference hosted by Amicus Therapeutics and BioNJ explored strategies to improve regulatory pathways, such as the use of natural history data for historical control, enhanced collaboration between sponsors and regulators, and the development of uniform guidelines in data extrapolation. These efforts seek to harmonize and improve the efficiency of the drug approval process, thereby increasing the availability of safe and effective treatments for patients with rare diseases. This law has had its impact on policies around the globe, as today there are 92 countries and territories enacting orphan drug policies (ODPs) to make these medicines available to patients more easily. Leading in the establishment of orphan medicines, the European Union has also had low-income countries realizing the importance of regulatory frameworks in the development and availability of orphan medicines; these countries have increasingly adopted similar policies since 2013. The new study found that such regulations are critical to fighting the health disparities faced by 300 million people worldwide suffering from rare diseases.[11]

2.2 Role of Regulatory Agencies

Regulatory authorities play a decisive role in the formation of policy development processes, especially within the context of media fake information and regulations. They are not limited to just introducing delegated abilities but have a significant influence on the policy development stage as you can clearly see from the Italian communication regulatory authorities (AGCOM) during COVID-19. They can even track issues, source expertise from different fields, and intervene in arising issues such as the fear of disinformation campaigns that may be targeting democratic processes. Deregulatory actions, especially due to the lack of social media companies' self-regulation, point towards demands for strong regulatory aspects to provide accountability and integrity while disseminating information.[12] Regulatory bodies thus seem an important actor to tackle issues in information governance modern times. The role of regulatory organizations is very important in pharmaceutical safety, efficiency, and quality. They establish and enforce comprehensive laws and guidelines that regulate the development, registration, production and distribution of pharmaceutical products, thereby protecting public health. [13] For example, India's Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) oversees drug approval, clinical trials and quality control, and works with state authorities to ensure uniform implementation of regulations under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act. In addition, international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) contribute to the global regulatory framework, enhancing public safety by improving legislation in previously unregulated areas .

These agencies ensure timely availability of safe and effective health products by facilitating research and innovation in the pharmaceutical industry [13].

2.3 Orphan Drug Designation Process

Orphan drug designation is a status assigned by the FDA to drugs and biological products that are intended for treating rare diseases. Rare diseases are defined as those that affect fewer than 200,000 people in the United States. From 1983 to 2019, orphan drug designations have dramatically increased in numbers and approvals. Pediatric-onset diseases have also gained more attention, with 27% of all designations made in the 2010s, the highest proportion on record.[14] The trend shows a growing investment in developing treatments for rare diseases and the need to address unmet medical needs in this area. Classifying these designations by therapeutic area and age at onset of action sheds light on the landscape of drug development for rare diseases.The orphan drug designation process classifies medicines as intended to treat rare diseases as defined by the Orphan Drug Act. The FDA also has a database which it records these different types of designations including date of designation and disease which the drug is aimed to cure. It does involve classifying it under the different therapeutic areas due to the organs which have been affected as well as other bigger diseases which would have their etiology, and the age when such a disease appears in patients. Other forms of classifications distinguish pediatric diseases from those occurring in adults. With the double classifications, a closer evaluation can be performed of drug development patterns as well as gaps which exist for potential ra@re disease treatment[14] Orphan Drug designation process: in the US it is provided for in the Office of Orphan Drug Development at the FDA which receives, and assesses the application submitted on the drug aimed to cure the rare diseases and have affected few persons who number 200 000 people in America, or drugs that because of development expenses could not regain from sale. The applicant must present a proposal showing superiority over other treatments in clinical grounds, such as higher efficacy or safety [15].

3. INCENTIVE AND BENEFIT FOR DEVELOPING ORPHAN DRUG

3.1 Market Exclusivity and Protection

Market exclusivity for orphan drugs is an important aspect of the regulatory framework in various countries. In the European Union, orphan drug designation provides with a 10-year market exclusive period and attempts to promote the research and development for rare diseases.[15] Japanese orphaned drug guidelines have provided a 10-year period of market exclusive, along with the provision of funds for research and tax reductions, as an essential incentive for the development of orphanages, investing in the development of orphanage drugs. Masu. Other researches indicate that an orphanage can get a longer period to enjoy a market exclusive. For instance, children in the orphanage are at an average age of 1, that is, extra 6 years; those who hold more than one name of an orphanage can benefit to have the prolonged period. However, the effectiveness of market exclusivity as a protective measure has been debated; one study found that orphan drugs had fewer generic competitors than conventional drugs, despite a shorter maximum patent term [16]. The Orphan Drug Act (ODA) provides significant market exclusivity and protection for

orphan drugs by providing a 7-year exclusivity period intended to encourage the development of treatments for rare diseases. This exclusivity has had a modest impact on the overall patent duration and market exclusivity of novel rare molecular entities (NMEs), but it has nonetheless led to a significant increase in the approval of orphan drugs, with 322 NMEs reaching the market since the adoption of the ODA in 1983. drug[17]. However, this exclusivity has not been effective as very few NMEs have gained benefits from this, mainly due to low expected benefits and the number of patients is very small. Moreover, this has also deterred generic competition.[21] Savings due to the entry of generics and biosimilars into the market were almost negligible even after accounting for all other forms of market exclusivity granted by the FDA[19]. Therefore, it suggests that market exclusivity is highly responsible for sustaining high prices and excluding market exclusivity for rare disease drugs, even considering other forms of market exclusivity. [22]

3.2Financial Incentive: Tax Credits, Grants.

As for financial incentives like tax credit and grants, they are widely applicable to encourage pharmaceutical research and development, especially in orphan drugs. In connection with that, the Orphan Drug Act provides tax credits worth 25% of clinical trial expenses that may help decrease the cumulative tax liability by about 70% . It has been determined to boost new clinical trials into an average of a 69% increased increment in the increment rate for a rare disease well-established over long [17]. Tax credits, along with some forms of subsidy, is amongst those financial incentives crucial for OMPs; in their cost, such incentives lessen their cost burden on developers as well as ensure their maximum yield for these developers. European orphans' regulations already include a reduction in costs at the regulatory stage and a period of exclusivity of the 10 -year market, but these measures may not undergo enough investment in areas with high unsatisfied needs, in particular for rare diseases with limited patients of patients [20]. To solve this problem, it is proposed to introduce new financial incentives, such as good laptops and budgetary incentives for the development of drugs, in order to better agree on investments with priority diseases [20].

3.2 Fee Waivers and Expedited approval processes.

The FDA may waive or reduce user fees in specific cases, such as when an applicant's resources are so limited that user fees would pose a significant obstacle to innovation. To qualify, applicants must prove that their product is innovative and that the fees would deter its effective development or marketing. The agency also considers the applicant's financial resources, including affiliates', in comparison to the annualized cost of the user fees. There is also the consideration of accelerated approval processes, which include priority designations and fast track status. These can result in faster availability in the market of innovative products to improve public health results [18].

4. MARKET ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

4.1 Price of Orphan Drugs

Expensive orphan drugs: Cost of development: The difficulties faced in recruiting enough patients for clinical trial result in greatly increased costs of research and development for orphan drugs [23] First in class orphan drugs are at a much higher risk of failure that also increases their costs of development

Impact on Patients and Healthcare Systems: The exorbitant prices of orphan drugs will limit patient access and stretch healthcare budgets as the costs are recovered over fewer patients

Examples and Pricing Models Spinraza® and Perjeta®: Spinraza® has an actual price of EUR 240,000, whereas Perjeta® costs EUR 78,510, thus demonstrating the substantial financial cost of these therapies. The pricing model contains an innovation premium, which is the value these drugs add to society beyond mere investor returns [23]

4.2 Reimbursement Challenges

Reimbursement of orphan drugs poses special challenges due to their high price and uncertain clinical benefits. As the market for such drugs grows, payers are squeezed between access and budget constraints.

Moderate Effect Sizes: Many orphan drugs have moderate effect sizes, which complicate their assessment for reimbursement [24] Clinical benefits are usually uncertain due to small patient populations and limited data

High Prices:

Orphan drugs are often very expensive, in some cases even reaching one million euros per patient The increasing cost of these drugs makes it increasingly difficult for healthcare systems to provide equitable access

Allocative and Technical Inefficiencies:

risk allocative inefficiency in that high expenditures on orphan drugs fail to generate proportional health benefits Technical inefficiencies may also arise from a lack of sufficient evidence to confirm the effectiveness of most orphan drugs [24]

5. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical Issues on Pricing and Access:

Orphan drugs, such as gene therapies, tend to have astronomically high prices that even exceed the capacities of most health systems and patients' budgets [26]. Although such a high price is based on the gravity of diseases being treated and long-lasting impact, this in turn leads to unequal distribution of these medicines among different segments of people, mainly among low-income ones[26].

Effect on Health Expenditures:

The high prices drive the diversion of resources away from the treatment of more prevalent illnesses, thus amplifying the total health care burden [26]

Government Accountability:

Regulatory Act: The federal governments have come up with legislation on orphan drugs to encourage orphan drug development; this ensures equality in access for the affected populations as well[26].

Financial Backing: Many of these costly treatments stem from studies and research undertaken on public backing; the prices also must be translucent as seen below in Pharmaceutical Industry Duty.

Affordability and access

The industry pharmaceutical must understand what is rational when it came to pricing when talking about therapies, considering the cases like gene therapies and the extra burdens of costly [26] Long-term Engagement: Firms are challenged to offer research collaboration with researchers and obtain mutual post-authorisation research commitments to ensure the long-term safety and effectiveness of their products

Advocacy in Research Collaboration with Researchers: PAs are attached to steering committees and advisory boards, which make the research more relevant with the incorporation of patient perspectives

Funding and Prioritization: They determine research priorities and funding strategies for the needs of patients [27]

Impact on Drug Development

Regulatory Involvement: PAs take part in the process of the European Medical Agency, influencing drug development with regard to rare diseases

Patient-Centric Approach: Involving PAs ensures the unmet medical needs of the patients are looked into [27]

6. FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN ORPHAN DRUG DEVELOPMENT

Future directions in orphan drug development are towards innovative therapies that bring new hope to patients with rare diseases. Significant advances in gene therapy, such as the approval of Zolgensma and Glybera, show the potential for targeted genetic interventions. Furthermore, the combination of gene and stem cell therapies is expected to enhance the effectiveness of treatments for conditions like hemophilia and immunodeficiencies. RNA-based therapies include antisense oligonucleotides, which offer promising hope in the treatment of genetic disorders and are being utilized for diseases like Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Public-private collaboration is crucial, as partnerships may help share resources and reduce risk investment. Examples of international collaboration include the International Rare Diseases Research Consortium, which was established to accelerate the diagnosis and therapy development process on a global level. At the same time, increased availability of orphan drugs is still one of the big challenges, focusing efforts on improving the regulatory framework, policy establishment of orphan drugs, and incentives for both patients and drug manufacturers. Closing the gaps could therefore significantly enhance access to rare diseases treatments in developing countries and across the world at large.[10,28,29]

7. CONCLUSION

Orphan drugs are very important drugs that treat rare diseases, of which millions are affected worldwide. The development of such drugs is marred by regulatory, financial, and ethical challenges, thus affecting the patients' access to these drugs. These orphan drugs offer crucial treatment alternatives for such rare conditions, most of which have no proven therapies; hence, such targeted solutions are a priority in the medical requirements of around 300 million people worldwide. Incentives like the U.S. Orphan Drug Act and corresponding ones across other territories have encouraged orphan drug development with incentives of financial and facilitative regulations. Recent advancements in regulatory pathways have further facilitated the approval of innovative treatments, including transformative gene therapies. However, the high costs of research and development, coupled with limited patient populations for clinical trials, pose significant financial and technical barriers. Additionally, ethical concerns surrounding accelerated approval processes highlight the need for a balanced approach to ensure thorough safety and efficacy evaluations.[26,,32,10]

As the orphan drug landscape continues to evolve, innovation, equitable access, and policy reforms are necessary to address these challenges. Gene and cell therapies and RNA-based treatments hold curative promise for diseases previously considered untreatable. Fast-track approvals have speeded up access to these groundbreaking therapies. However, high prices remain a significant barrier, especially in low-income countries, where affordability limits access. Collaborative efforts between governments, pharmaceutical companies, and patient advocacy groups are needed to ensure equitable distribution and affordability of these treatments. Comprehensive orphan drug policies, including price regulation and incentives for market availability, are necessary to improve access. Managed entry agreements and risk-sharing models can further balance the financial burden while allowing access to high-cost therapies. [26,32,31]

Rare Diseases' treatment landscape is witnessing rapid transformation by gene therapy, stem cell therapy, and small nucleic acid drugs. In the wake of these discoveries, patients now expect better patient outcomes, especially those conditions previously devoid of alternative treatment options. Accelerated regulatory pathways and the active involvement of patient advocacy organizations are facilitating faster access to life-saving therapies and awareness regarding the need for continuous research and development. With the removal of financial, ethical, and regulatory barriers, the global community can ensure that orphan drugs achieve their full potential to transform the lives of those suffering from rare diseases, thus bringing a more inclusive and effective healthcare system into being for the future. [31,28]

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